

TESTIMONY

of

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before the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on legislative proposals:

H.R.3253, the National Medical Emergency Preparedness Act of 2001;
and H.R.3254, the Medical Education for the National Defense in the 21st
Century Act.

Wednesday, April 10, 2002,
3:00 P.M., Room 334
Cannon House Office Building

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I am pleased to present the views of AMVETS regarding H.R. 3253, the National Medical Emergency Preparedness Act of 2001 and H.R. 3254, the Medical Education for the National Defense in the 21st Century Act.

H.R. 3253, the National Medical Emergency Preparedness Act of 2001:

AMVETS supports H.R.3253, the National Medical Emergency Preparedness Act of 2001. This is timely and important legislation, which will better allow our nation to address the many faceted threats we face as we move forward in a dangerous and uncertain age.

Mr. Chairman, as we all are painfully aware, this nation suffered a national scare last fall in the wake of the anthrax attack. As that event showed, without medical awareness, medical care workers and first responders will not have the single most important tool to use in an attack—the expertise to treat exposure effectively and help us avoid public panic and the loss of commonplace and essential services. H.R. 3253 is a reasonable first step in implementing the lessons learned from last fall.

If and when the next terrorist act threatens our homeland, it could be just as easily in the form of chemical or radiological hazard as the biological threat seen with anthrax. AMVETS believes the establishment of medical emergency preparedness centers within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) represents a commonsense approach toward protecting public health and safety in the future.

The VA is known worldwide for its research, quality of patient care, and ability to train healthcare workers. It has already shown a capacity to apply expertise and leading edge research in the fields of geriatrics, mental health, and prosthetics.

With these good works as a model, AMVETS believes the VA will provide superior research into the detection and treatment of biological, chemical, or radiological attacks or events that may threaten us in the future.

The important consideration in establishing these national medical preparedness centers, however, is funding. It is critical that these operations receive specific earmarked appropriations, separate from the VA's standard healthcare funding.

H.R. 3254, the Medical Education for the National Defense in the 21st Century Act:

AMVETS supports H.R. 3254, the Medical Education for the National Defense in the 21st Century Act. We believe this proposal goes "hand-in-glove" with the goals outlined by H.R. 3253.

As we witnessed during the anthrax event, several of the cases of anthrax went misdiagnosed, or worse, undiagnosed. This inability by healthcare workers to recognize the incidence of anthrax in its initial stages led to the unfortunate deaths of several people. These tragic failures should serve as a wake up call for us all. Our healthcare system must be equipped and trained to handle any threat, especially one involving biological, chemical or radiological agents.

The Smith bill, H.R. 3253, and the Buyer measure, H.R. 3254, are complimentary. The tactics and procedures that flow from the provisions of H.R. 3253 would be useless unless disseminated to healthcare professionals and our entire nation for effective treatment and response. At the present time, the Department of Defense Uniform Services University of Health Services, located on Jones Bridge Road in Bethesda, Maryland, is the only medical school in the nation that stresses diagnoses and treatment of persons exposed to biological, chemical or radiological agents as a fundamental part of its curriculum.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS believes that the proposed medical education programs would be a good investment for the country and help enable our healthcare professionals to play a more significant role in the future health and security needs of our nation.

The inescapable fact is that we cannot simply rely on chance to counter those who would do us harm. We must be prepared to treat the victims of such an attack if it were ever to occur. The proposal outlined in this legislation provides essential assistance that can help protect us all in the event of a future attack.

AMVETS thanks you for the opportunity to present our views on these proposals.

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